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ABSTRACT

Much of the clamor about instructional relevance today results from student dissatisfaction with (1) the narrow and anachronistic definition of literature commonly given by teachers, (2) the artificial compartmentalizing of literary works, and (3) the assumption that literature can only be apprehended through analysis. Rather than concentrating solely on poetry, drama, and fiction, teachers should spend more time on non-fictional works and the new mixed genres. Rather than separating works by time, genre, or national origin, teachers should arrange sequences solely on the basis that one work is better understood because of its relationship to another. Teachers must also recognize that an effective experience involves more than literary analysis and must begin to deal directly with humanistic and moral values as well as esthetic ones. (DD)

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RELEVANCE AND IRRELEVANCE IN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE*

Harold C. Martin

The word "relevance" is pretty well worn out from recent overuse, but the subject is not. In one form or another, the issue of relevance promises to be the most significant one in school and college for a good many years to come. And, although its major focus now is one of social concerns, I think it should be obvious that no branch of academic study can remain invulnerable to it.

The abuses and foolishness sanctioned by the term "relevance" should not obscure the serious arguments that are being made and the serious conditions that call for re-examination of what we are doing. The question is not—and never was—whether literature is relevant. The question, not a new one, is what makes the *study* of literature relevant in any given time. This is not so much a matter of justifying the study of literature as of examining how the uses of it change as times change.

A former college president, himself a distinguished scholar-teacher, told me recently of a special seminar conceived by the English department of his university three years ago to demonstrate the relevance of literature to the concerns of college students. He discovered that it had in fact nothing to do with literature at all but resolved itself into open-ended discussion about the social issues uppermost in students' minds—the draft, the war, the state of American society, the plight of the Chicano, and so on. The department of English had apparently decided that the best way to demonstrate the relevance of literature was by demonstrating the social concern of the teachers of literature.

If this exercise in self-indulgence led to something better, it may have been worthwhile, yet it seems to me at best only half-intelligent. It mistakes, in my judgment, both the principal values of literature and the reasons for modern students' hostility toward much of what they encounter in the school and college curriculum of English studies. I do not find students hostile to literature itself. I find, indeed, that they are inclined to expect more of it than it can supply and to attribute more power to it than it really has. What I *do* find is dissatisfaction primarily with three things, all of them matters of relevance, if one understands relevance not as a connection between literature and the world but as a connection between literature and the student's *apprehension* of the world.

The three sources of dissatisfaction seem to me to be these: the narrow and somewhat anachronistic definition commonly

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given by teachers to the term "literature"; artificial compartmentalizing of literary works; and the assumption that literature can only be apprehended through analysis. I believe that a great deal of the clamor about relevance in the study of literature would abate if teachers generally made some strategic changes in their practices on these three counts. I doubt seriously that turning literature classes into political seminars or substituting a fashionable book for a "standard" one will, even in the short run, make the study of literature relevant to anyone.

By and large, courses in literature, especially in the upper years of high school and in college, limit themselves to *belles lettres:* to poetry, drama, fiction. A few essays creep in, occasionally a bit of biography or autobiography, and, of course, some literary criticism. I have characterized such limitation as "narrow" and "somewhat anachronistic"—narrow, because literature can with entire propriety be more broadly defined if one chooses to define it more broadly; anachronistic, because for the past two decades, at least, the conventional narrow definition has had less and less sanction among the makers of literature. Two discernible divergences from convention in contemporary literary activity are thoroughly evident. The first is the gradual supersession of the non-fictional over the fictional; the second is the emergence of new mixed genres.

If you look through a dozen of the best general magazines published weekly, monthly, or quarterly in this country, you will see that *belles lettres* occupy relatively few pages in any issue. Contemporary social and political comment, social and psychological analysis, historical and descriptive studies, "personality pieces" (modern equivalent of biography), and the like have crowded what we call "imaginative literature" into second place or third.

What is more interesting, however, is that the kind of writing that has taken the place of *belles lettres* has borrowed liberally from the patterns and modes of expression of imaginative literature. I judge that writers recognize two things about the public they serve, that it is more interested in what it views as reality than it is in invention and that it nonetheless wants its reality served up with all the trappings of invention. The sociological essays and books of Oscar Lewis, Erik Erikson's new biography of Ghandi, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, all are expert and typical examples of the mixed genre that has come to dominate contemporary writing. In each, the substratum of fact is given life and significance by the deployment of literary devices, a mixture that is far from new but one that has renewed vitality in our time.

Since this contemporary mode is what our students grow up with, I suggest that one strategy for literature courses is to make

the most of what it implies: to make the most not only of contemporary hybrids but of those readily enough available from the past—works like Dostoievsky's *Notes from Underground,* Stern's *Tristram Shandy,* Herodotus' history; polemical more often than lyric poetry; political and social essays rather than those rather arch essayistic performances that most often find their way into anthologies.

The examples I have just used already indicate my agreement with students about the second source of dissatisfaction, the artificial compartmentalizing of literary works. Now quite obviously an argument can be made for separating Latin from French from German from English literature, and even for separating English from American literature. One can make an argument for almost any kind of separation—of novels from poetry, of poetry from drama, *ad infinitem.* And the arguments have some merit, though often less merit than is claimed for them. However, as far as the meaning of literature for the student goes, I would say that the only sound argument for any classification or for any sequence is that Work A is better understood because of the relationship in which it is placed, by category or sequence, to Work B. And I would insist that the better understanding not be some vague business like "the development of the form" but be quite explicit and precise: unless you have read A, you simply won't get very much out of B. That would at least put an end to some specious claims, whether or not it put an end to categorizing and sequencing. It is quite sound to say, for instance, that a student who reads Dryden's *All for Love* needs to read, or to have read, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra.* And that one who reads Wallace Stevens' "Susanna and the Elders" without having even heard of the Apocrypha will be the poorer for his ignorance. But the truth also is that most categories and most sequences are matters of convenience rather than of necessity; at least, as far as the teaching goes, they are that. If that be the case, then there should be no great discomfort about broadening the definition of and rearranging the relationship of literary works for any given course.

Whether we are deeply affected by it ourselves or not, we are all aware that the generations of students we are now teaching have much less sense of time and space patterns than we had. They think of the world more often than of the nation; they are so overwhelmed by the present that they have little interest in making sharp discriminations about one or another part of the past, because for them it is simply all that time preceding Now. Mingling the works of many cultures and times does not discomfit them; reducing the demarcations between what is invented and what is real, between "fact" and "imaginative crea-

tion," far from discomfiting them, seems to them simply good sense since it more or less corresponds with the vague notions they have about the links between the conscious and the unconscious and about the relationship between perception and the perceived.

The heresy of that last statement leads me to the third source of dissatisfaction, the assumption that literature has to be analyzed to be understood.

It would be the grossest kind of misrepresentation to suggest that English teachers are now or have been in recent times indifferent to the problems posed by analysis. Indeed I suspect that more skill and ingenuity have gone into systems of analysis over the past forty years than in all the centuries preceding—and I speak quite seriously, fully aware that literary analysis goes back almost as far as recorded literature. How much of this earnest effort has been useful, how much has been web-spinning, I know no way of measuring. Yet it is certainly true that the various kinds of analysis developed in recent decades—historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, political, economic, linguistic, esthetic—have illumined dark passages and set entire works in new and valuable perspectives.

Yet against all this devoted scrutiny by teachers and by their most diligent—and most imitative—students, there has risen the constant cry that the analyst murders to dissect. While we may brush that criticism off as a sign of philistinism, we ought perhaps to admit that it is pervasive enough to require some more intelligent response than scorn. The simple fact may well be that literature has to be understood *before* it can be analyzed, a fact that students seem to have apprehended intuitively, if not by revulsion against a practice they distrust.

We have certainly heard a great amount of nonsense in the past four or five years about intuition, about private and ecstatic response to experience of all kinds. Nonsensical, or at least exaggerated, as most of that talk has been, I believe there is one significant matter in it—the insistence that an affective experience involves more than cerebration, more than thinking about something. That insistence accounts, I suspect, for the discernible shift among the students whom I know away from literary study either toward sociology or toward the plastic and performing arts, in both of which they can find a means of *realizing* their affective response in quite palpable ways, in social and creative action. There is probably nothing really new in this eagerness of students to find physical forms for arriving at and expressing their feelings. The difference between this time and earlier ones may be simply that we have now in school and college a greater number of students whose temperament is not so much abstrac-

tive as manipulative, people who work more readily with the materials they can handle physically than with pure concepts. If that be true, or even if some other condition accounts for the disposition to distrust literary analysis, the indication is clear enough that teachers should do what they can to turn the manipulative temperament, the desire to *do* something, to good account. I would therefore suggest that the making of literature become, even in advanced classes, a common part of the study of literature. The literature that is made will not be very good literature; neither are the canvasses that are painted in art classes or the solutions that are compounded in chemistry laboratories. That is not the point. If the efforts at creation create nothing worth while, they will nonetheless develop in the amateur creator a much richer sense of what creation amounts to. If nothing else, they will teach him humility, a virtue rarely found in the amateur analyst.

We have had classes in creative writing for a long time, of course, and surely they should go on and be increased in number as well as quality. What I have in mind, however, is not separate classes in creative writing but the introduction of productive and reproductive exercises into the study of literature itself—by imitation, by parody, by extension, by problem-solving to match the problem-solving originally done by the author.

A second way to provide for the student a sense that his literary study is a doing of his whole person, not just of his cerebellum, is to face with him quite openly the matter of value and values. I say "face with him" because I have no doubt about *his* readiness to face it; indeed he runs at it head-on. Teachers however have had their fingers burned often enough to know that a dealing with values other than esthetic values makes as many problems as it solves. Yet I think the problems must be braved, for it is clear to me that students can benefit now particularly from one quality of literature that modern analysis has rather tended to dismiss as beyond its interest or competence.

Whatever else it does, a literary work in some way reorganizes the world for us; whether it is a poem or a novel, an essay or even an autobiography, it substitutes an artificial—a created—world for the daily world of our experience. Out of materials we know or can recognize, it constructs a new relationship, a new system of being; inevitably, that relationship and system are infused with values, like an electrical bond holding all the diverse molecules together in a magnetic, if temporary, alliance.

What matters to the young reader is the temporary reality of that world quite as much as the skill that the artificer shows. Correctly understood and correctly taught, it can help him to make sense, some kind of sense, out of the welter of experience

into which he is daily plunged and by which he is all but submerged. Literature as preachment? Literature as life-model? It is fashionable to decry both and to pretend that art is art, life is life, and never the twain shall meet. Yet the fact is that they do meet; if art has any virtue at all, it must be virtue that is somehow absorbed into life. The issue then is only that of finding the richest means of absorption, and what I am saying now is that, for this time and the students we teach, direct dealing with value and values, humanistic and moral as well as esthetic, is necessary if we are to capture again for the study of literature the central place it has long had in humanistic studies.

Briefly put, this is the point. In all the fuss about relevance and in our proper concern to find out what is substantial in that fuss, I believe we make a mistake if we think that reading "black literature" or literature of the 'seventies or literature that deals directly "with the issues" will make much difference in students' view of the study of literature as a relevant or an irrelevant activity. They may help, but they will not solve our problem unless at the same time as teachers we manage to tune our harps to wave-lengths the students are receiving.

A few weeks ago as I was going over packets of old correspondence, I came on four letters from a student whom I taught several years ago. I had known him better than I knew most students I was teaching that year, for two reasons: at the beginning of the term he had shown unusual insight and skill in everything he wrote for me and had therefore attracted my attention; and from the middle of the year on I had detected a growing disjunction in his style and evidence of mental struggle in the content of his essays. The two often occur together and are not uncommon in bright students, so I was not greatly disturbed, but we did have ten or a dozen talks about his work during the spring.

The letters came almost a year later, and they were addressed from a hospital for the insane. In one of them, this student told me that, shortly before he left college in May, he had come to another of the courses I was teaching to hear me lecture on Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Now that is a novel which moves me deeply every time I read it, but it is also a difficult novel for the uninitiated to read, so I had spent the entire lecture dealing with some of its formal properties. The student wrote, "The lecture was a chill disappointment to me. Oh, I suppose it was a necessary lecture. It was perhaps even a first-rate *academic* lecture. But it was all about the art of the novel and, for me at least, the art counts only as it enriches and illuminates life. That is what I came to hear, and I did not hear it."

On that spring day, seven years ago, the student's sense of relevance and irrelevance was better than his teacher's.

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